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ABSTRACT

Students who write the least in initial prewriting are often passionate and philosophical talkers--during unplanned conversations they will freely "compose" stories. This realization led one educator to consider using interviewing as a discovery technique. From the perspective of qualitative research methods, interviews are seen as "speech events" in which interviewers and respondents work collaboratively to "make meaning." In successful interviews, interviewers and respondents exhibit a sense of trust, mutuality, and openness--the same qualities that should be promoted in a writing class. A prewriting version of interviewing can be used with more than two persons as long as only one person is being interviewed. Three effective types of prewriting interviews are topic searches, focused interviews, and follow-up interviews. Two metaphors, bridge-building and story-mining, help students grasp the basic principles of "discovery interviewing." In bridge-building the interviewer must personally give something to receive something in return; the interviewer needs to convey a genuine interest in the respondent to establish rapport and facilitate the flow of stories. The interviewer, during the story-mining phase, should watch for the most promising veins to mine. During the first week of each term, the class follows this activity sequence: on the first day, students break into pairs and find out as much as they can about the other person in 10 minutes; on the second day, the discovery interview process is explained; on the third day, the first 15-20 minutes of class is for sharing writing drafts with respondents. (NKA)

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Interviewing: Bridge-Building and Story-Mining

> . . . the best way to keep theory lively and practice responsive is to have *in mind* models and metaphors to *remind* us and our students of what is involved in learning and teaching the composing process. (Berthoff 89)

For the past couple of years, I've been exploring new ways to help my students draw out their own and other's stories. By "stories" I mean the impromptu explorations, musings, and reflections that stem from the natural flow of thought and language. It's a given, of course, that these stories contain the raw stuff that skilled writers mine and refine into polished products. However, students seldom see them in this way. I've observed that students who write the least in initial prewriting are often passionate and philosophical talkers—that is, when they aren't *trying* to prewrite. During unplanned conversations, they will freely "compose" elaborate and insightful stories, especially when an active listener helps to explore and shape those emerging stories.

This realization has led me to consider the use of interviewing as a discovery technique. I want my students to see the value of unplanned (or minimally planned) conversations and to trust their own listening and questioning skills. To achieve these goals, I'm drawing upon qualitative research methods, which provide a theoretical framework for viewing all conversations as potential interviews. From this perspective, interviews are seen as "speech events" in which interviewers and respondents work collaboratively to "make meaning." Interviewers are seen as active listeners in an other-centered process of discovery, and they seek to empower and assist respondents however they can. In successful interviews, interviewers and respondents exhibit a

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sense of "trust, mutuality, and openness to the potential for intimacy that comes with shared disclosure of beliefs and values" (Mishler 30). Not surprisingly, these are the same qualities I wish to promote in my writing classes, for I can think of no more effective way to tap my students' creative potential than to begin with "trust, mutuality, and openness."

In this presentation, I will share my own prewriting version of this approach, which I call *discovery interviewing*. This type of interviewing can be used with more than two persons (preferably not more than three or four) as long as only one person is being interviewed at a time. My premise is that it's hard, if not impossible, to mine more than one claim at a time—at least with any careful attention. Therefore, the interviewer or interviewers must recognize their evolving roles as bridge builders, prospectors, and finally (after story veins begin to appear) as miners. I will first present two metaphors, *bridge-building* and *story-mining*, that help students to grasp the basic principles of discovery interviewing. Next, I will discuss three types of prewriting interviews: topic searches, focused interviews, and follow-up interviews. And lastly, I will suggest a sequence of activities to introduce them to students.

BRIDGE-BUILDING

Before a climate of "trust, mutuality, and openness" can be achieved, much less a sharing of stories on a deeper level, an interviewer must establish rapport with a respondent. This is an initial effort to bridge the chasm of differences and uncertainty between interviewer and respondent. The interviewer must give something of him- or herself to receive something in return: there is a law of reciprocity at work here. As much as possible, the interviewer needs to convey a genuine interest in the respondent and to do whatever is possible to help him or her open up, let the guard down, and maybe recall or compose things that would resist other forms of exploration.

The interviewer should take on the role of an interested confidant—not a pushy reporter—to establish rapport and facilitate the flow of stories. This will often involve talking about him- or herself to get things going. However, the primary goal of bridge building is to shift the focus from interviewer to respondent as soon as the respondent's stories begin to flow. Then, the interviewer can concentrate fully, during the story mining stage, on the other's needs, helping to shape or construct his or her thoughts while not impeding the natural flow of emerging stories.

STORY-MINING

In a sense, all writers, novice and professional, are prospectors who search for "Klondike spaces" where they can stake claims and mine for riches (Perkins 120). During the story-mining stage, interviewers should watch for the most promising veins to mine. They can gently redirect the flow of the interview after respondents have finished playing out particular strands of thought. By observing the rhythms of an interview (i.e., the silences and pauses), they can redirect attention to previous ideas, ask for elaboration, etcetera.

As respondents open up more fully, interviewers need to be sensitive "listeners" who allow them to have center stage. Nothing should impede the natural flow of ideas; each emerging thought should be allowed to take its course. The interviewers should always be interested inquirers who encourage the respondents to fully develop each idea as it emerges. However, they should avoid highly sensitive areas, if sufficient rapport hasn't been established, as well as vague issues that aren't likely to lead anywhere (Glesne and Peshkin 69). The primary goal at this stage is to seek out and mine the most productive veins of thought. Although there are specific questioning strategies that can be taught, the most important concept to teach students is to trust their own instincts and communicative skills.

PREWRITING INTERVIEWS

> Like explorers in the physical world, the intellectual explorer must be willing to accept risks and failures that so often accompany exploration. . . . (Becker, Young, and Pike 135)

Research has shown that professional writers spend as much as fifty percent of their time on prewriting in some form or another. Prewriting is a vital activity to break through the hard rock or gray matter that hinders the discovery process. Unfortunately, many students move prematurely into the drafting stage before they've done enough prewriting. Orally-based methods can help them to tap the unconscious composing skills that writing-based methods (e.g., freewriting, listing, clustering), by themselves, can't always reach. Discovery prewriting is a valuable tool to complement the writing-based techniques. The basic interviews that I use with my students (i.e., topic searches, focused interviews, and follow-up interviews) are not "new"; in fact, they are typical workshop activities—but with a strong emphasis on bridge building and story mining.

Before engaging in *topic search interviews*, my students will usually have done some preliminary searching on their own. Following class discussion, topic "research" (in some form or another), and/or freewriting, they bring a general topic idea with them to explore with two or three interviewers. In five- to eight-minute sessions (after some bridge building, of course), each student takes his or her turn as the respondent, playing out topic-related ideas as the "interviewers" first prospect and then mine for explanation and development of ideas. In this interview, the emphasis is on "talking" rather than "writing" (they can jot notes if they don't hinder the conversation). After *all* interviews (including the ones to follow), students are given time to freewrite (or just to write) about the topic ideas they have begun to mine.

Both *focused* and *follow-up interviews* have similar formats to the topic search interview although their length will vary according to individual circumstances. All three progress from bridge building to prospecting to mining to writing down new ideas or additions to old ones. The respondent can jot down notes before or after the interview, and then write a journal-length entry after all group members have been interviewed. In the latter two interviews, interviewers will have specific stories to concentrate on since all students will have engaged, at this point, in various writing and research activities to self-mine as much as possible. The interviewers will bridge-build by asking questions about what the writer is currently working on and then move into mining his or her ideas further. Follow-up interviews are intended to help the respondent more effectively shape and construct those ideas, especially for a specific purpose and audience.

INTRODUCING DISCOVERY INTERVIEWING

> . . . solid, extended prewriting is the most effective activity to be found in the writing teacher's tool kit. It offers high return for the time invested. . . . (Zemelman and Daniels 132)

Since discovery interviewing, at least superficially, closely resembles what my students might have done in other classes, I set aside the first few classes to reshape how they see collaborative work in general. I want them to see the difference between hit-or-miss strip mining (i.e., surface exploration) and deep-shaft mining, which is what successful writers use; many writers (if not most) use some form of discovery interviewing in collaborating with other writers. Therefore, I tell them that we are going to do what these writers do: to spend lots of concentrated time on prospecting and mining for ideas instead of moving prematurely into the drafting process.

To introduce bridge-building and story mining as a prewriting technique, I use the following sequence of activities during the first week of each term. On the *first day* (which is actually the second day of classes), I break students into pairs and have them do an interview activity in which they are to find out as much about the other person as they can in ten minutes—and I make it a point to be a participant also. After *we* have completed our interviews, we take ten minutes to make a journal entry of not only factual details but also our overall impressions. As we write our responses, I strongly suggest that we consider any potential ideas that might lead into a mini-"feature story" to share with each other, both orally and in a printed version (either in a photocopied "anthology" or on a class web page). For homework, I ask the students to write five or six "starter" questions to help their respondents to go back and develop ideas that emerged in the previous interview.

On the *second day*, I begin by briefly explaining the "discovery interview" approach I want them to try in their second "interviews." They are encouraged to jot notes *after* interviews, rather than during them, to keep their emphasis on the larger story ideas that will ultimately shape their narratives (they can ask later for clarification of details). To illustrate, I ask my student-partner to sit beside me in front of the class while I do my best as the consummate other-centered interviewer. I invite the other students to help me "mine" any of his or her ideas further. Afterwards, we talk about what they observed (and my respondent experienced). Then, *we* resume our paired groups to interview each other (my partner will interview me) for another ten-minute session. The times are flexible and should be as long as students can use productively. After the interviews, we use the remaining time (at least ten minutes) to write down additional ideas that have emerged. For homework, we write a rough draft to share with our respondents. (At this point, we will have begun other aspects of the course, so "discovery interviewing" will become a starter activity for the first two weeks of class.)

On the *third day*, we take the first fifteen to twenty minutes of class to share drafts with our respondents. During this follow-up session, we can ask further questions. Then, we take ten minutes to refine and revise our initial drafts. During the last few minutes, I read aloud my own draft to give the class a sense of how a short feature story might be written (of course, I will have mostly written it before class). For homework, we refine drafts further to read aloud to everyone over the next two to three classes, as time allows. Then, by the following Monday, they will give me a written version that I will anthologize in some form or another during the next week.

CONCLUSION

This sequence of events is merely a starting point to help students become sensitive to *the value of conversation in prewriting*. Because I believe that learning by doing is the best way to teach this approach, I use these activities at the beginning of each term. As we move into prewriting for other assignments, *we* will talk about what we've found that helps others to open up and talk freely. I will present specific questioning and response techniques to help them better understand what they are already doing, to some extent, unconsciously. I want them to see their natural skills in being able to direct the movement of conversations toward potentially rich veins of thought.

Future discovery interviews will change dramatically when the interviewer begins mining for the *respondent's* primary use of the stories rather his or her own. However, the basic interview dynamic remains the same. As students begin the discovery process for any writing assignment, they can help each other to prospect and mine for ideas. The difference, of course, is that the respondents will write their own "stories" after others have helped to shape and construct them. If a bridge of trust and respect has been built between interviewers and respondents, story travel becomes so natural and frequent that each side's stories begin to merge in some way with the

other's. They learn and grow together as they share in each other's story mining and refining. Ultimately, as they learn to step outside themseves to help others, they will also learn, to some extent, to step back from themselves and become their own interviewers.

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